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ABSTRACT

The influx of Caribbean West Indian immigrants into the United States has evoked mixed responses from the Afro American black community. The West Indians' high degree of literacy, sense of community, and high self esteem have developed black leaders who have earned the respect of enlightened Afro Americans through their achievements in education, politics, and black rights activism. On the other hand, there has been a notable hostility in relations between West Indians and Afro Americans in the 1920s. The tensions seem to stem, on the one hand, from Afro Americans' feelings of superiority over West Indians and the former's resentment of what they perceive to be the latter's air of sophistication; and on the other hand, from the West Indians' own air of superiority because of their British accents and association with sovereign origins. Relations between the two groups must be improved through a better understanding of cultural differences, an area of study in which educators should play an important role. (MJL)

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John C. Walter

WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS: THOSE ARROGANT BASTARDS*

IN THE SUMMER OF 1956 in New York City, I was given a ride home from work by a black man. I was new to America and I inquired of him about the places and people we passed. His comments were general until we passed a block of well-kept, brightly painted brownstones in Brooklyn near Prospect Park, and my new friend exclaimed, "Do you know who owns this whole block?" Before I could indicate that I hadn't the foggiest, my friend explained, "West Indians, that's who. Those arrogant bastards!"

I was astonished, to say the least, not by the information that West Indians owned the houses, but by my benefactor's sudden rage. It wasn't necessary for me to say more; indeed, I did not want to speak anymore, for I realized my driver had not yet realized that I was one of "those arrogant bastards." In my silence, I learned a great deal, not about West Indian immigrants but about my friend, and what, I presumed, a number of his friends felt about these pesky foreigners. A few years later, while in graduate school, I heard the same phrase repeated in a New York subway conversation, and I decided then to look for the causes for this response of one group of Africa's descendants to the other.

In my research I found that the interaction between West Indian/Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Americans has been and is of greater magnitude than is generally known.

The West Indian immigrant has played a significant role in Afro-American life since the 18th century. For example, in 1775 Prince Hall, a native of Barbados living in Boston, established the first Negro Masonic Order in the American colonies.[1] During the American Revolution, George Lick left Savannah, Georgia and settled in Jamaica where he

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established the first black Baptist church.[2] In the period immediately following the American Revolution, North and South Carolina found it undesirable to have liberty-conscious blacks from the West Indies in their midst.[3] It is indeed noteworthy that of the first two Afro-Americans to gain a college education in 1826, one, John Brown Russwurm, was from Jamaica. It was Russwurm who co-founded the first Afro-American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in 1827, a year after his graduation from Bowdoin College.

Less known but certainly as important as Russwurm is Robert Brown Elliot, born of West Indian parents in Boston in 1842 and educated in Jamaica and England. Elected to the South Carolina Legislature in 1868, he rose to Attorney General of that state in 1876. A distinguished lawyer and gifted speaker, he served two terms in the U.S. Congress during Reconstruction.[4] The importance of Edward Wilmot Blyden is not well understood either. Although he lived in the United States only a few months in 1850, his influence on black Americans was more than minimal. In 1862, he visited the United States as a "Back to Africa" ambassador, and his exhortations had a direct effect on the Back to Africa efforts of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner between 1880 and 1915.[5]

It is known that West Indians have migrated to the United States all during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Census and immigration figures show, however, that from 1900 to 1924, there was an accelerated increase in the number of West Indians to the United States. By 1924, 12,243 persons were admitted, the majority of whom were English-speaking, but in 1925, this figure dropped to 791, and 1,094 were deported. The reason for this was the immigration law of 1924, curtailing immigration generally, while at the same time restricting the darker "races" from entering.[6] This situation lasted until 1942 when, despite quotas, the Department of Labor recruited large numbers of West Indians to work on the farms to aid the war effort. Many of these stayed on, some legally, and some illegally.

But these World War II immigrants were of a different sort than those that came in the period of 1900–1930. Those before came unrecruited, and in consequence enjoyed a freedom of choice in jobs, political affiliations, and mobility. The majority of them migrated to New York, Tampa, Miami, and Boston, with New York getting by far the largest numbers, so that by 1930, 57 per cent of all Caribbean immigrants lived in New York; the next largest concentration, 6 per cent, being in Miami.[7]

This concentration of West Indians in New York led to the expansion of group identity, aided by native rejection and the subsequent proliferation of various West Indian clubs. The Barbadian Club was extant as

early as 1901. And by 1912, the Jamaica Progressive League was established. Around late 1912, the West Indian League was formed, which was an association of West Indian clubs including those with a non-British background.

Undoubtedly, a sense of community was evident among the West Indian immigrants as early as 1912, and perhaps before. And it was to these community organizations that Marcus Garvey made his most successful pitch at the beginning of the U.N.I.A. Without these groups, it is problematical whether the rise of Garvey would have been so swift.

It is my contention that this concentration of politically conscious West Indians in New York, as early as 1900, and later in Miami, Washington, Boston, and Philadelphia set examples for some indigenous blacks, while at the same time alienating others. The net effect, however, was a positive one and resulted in a changed perspective for the American black in the 20th century.

More can be said about the relationships of native and immigrant blacks in the 20th century than before, because a) more immigrants came in this period and consequently b) their activities were more widespread. It is important to note in any discussion of the West Indian impact on American life in the 20th century that a peculiar situation characterized black life after the Spanish-American War. By the turn of the century, Jim Crow reigned supreme, segregation was the law of the land in the southern states and conventionally practiced in the northern states, and most importantly, despite the efforts of Thomas Fortune, Ida B. Wells, and W. E. B. Du Bois, accommodation was the name of the game.

In addition, the leadership was fragmented into two clearly distinct camps: Washington and Emmet J. Scott *vs.* Du Bois and Monroe Trotter, until 1915. By 1916, at the Amenia Conference, the breach was healed, but no radically new methods were being tried, nor was any new ideology being prompted to deal with the problems of blacks.[8]

More importantly, the efforts of indigenous blacks always failed when trying anything based in race pride—three outstanding examples being the National Negro Academy, the Niagra Movement, and the Afro-American League. Those organizations, such as the Urban League and the N.A.A.C.P., in coalition with and dominated by whites, were of low visibility and viability until after the Garvey Movement declined and really did not take off until after World War I.

Generally speaking then, the effective leadership of Washington was indeed accommodationist, and so was the psychology of the majority of blacks. In the case of the assertive leadership of Du Bois, Turner, and

Trotter, they all had the common failing of no effective following.

It is my contention (amply documented elsewhere) that the psychology of the black American, leaders and followers, in the very large majority was one of hesitancy during this period, and what was required, if not desired, was leadership that instilled pride in the ancestry of race, and formulated and pushed radical programs for improving the race's posterity.

The West Indians came ably equipped to do this. For one thing, the West Indian immigrant was always literate, and a large number of them were of an educational level approximating the "talented tenth" that Du Bois so passionately desired.[9] As Maldwyn Jones has pointed out in his book, *American Immigration*, the West Indian in greater part usually had a skill which, until 1924, endeared him to the Immigration Department.[10] This is important because this made him the dual purpose person that both Du Bois and Washington desired. More importantly, those West Indians of primary education usually sought to improve it, and they had a tendency to seek out the lucrative professions. A further example is, by 1930, 40 per cent of the M.D.s in *Who's Who in Colored America* were West Indians, while West Indians accounted for between only 1.2 and 1.5 per cent of the population.[11]

But most important was the West Indian's self contempt. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the distinguished Afro-American historian, noted in 1931 that on landing, the West Indian felt himself to be the equal of any man.[12] For the West Indian migrant, particularly those of British background, American whites were unpolished, crude, lacking in culture and manners, and not to be taken seriously at the social level. This view bolstered the firm feeling of high individual worth of the West Indian, and consequently, no one could convince him that skin color made him inferior. Even Garvey—as a self-confessed victim of racial slurs in his own Jamaica—did not see himself as inferior to anyone, but as a superior individual.

One might say that the history of the West Indies was characterized by a greater feeling of successes over the white man during and after slavery, by an absence of segregation, and by the practice of intermarriage. The resulting attitude ruled out the massive feeling of uncertainty that developed and remained among blacks in this country during and after the slave period.

Among the earliest West Indian immigrants that rejected accommodation as well as the Du Boisian view was the immigrant Hubert Harrison, a native of St. Croix. In the same year that both Bishop Turner and Booker T. Washington died (1915), Harrison was already

exhorting blacks to become Socialists—something never before suggested—and was active in recruiting blacks into the fold of the industrial white world. Harrison was the political father figure for all the black left-leaning poitical activists (West Indian and native born) from 1912 until the Harlem Renaissance. In consequence of his participation in strikes and demonstrations against despised capitalists, he politicized A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen—two indigenous blacks who later became influential in the Negro press, and in the labor movement. Harrison was also the dominant early influence on W. A. Domingo, a West Indian immigrant who was the real power behind Randolph and Owen in the publication and editorship of *The Messenger* magazine. In fact, the decline of *The Messenger* began when Domingo left in 1924. A very good example of Harrison's outlook on the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States was his condemnation of W. E. B. Du Bois in his newspaper, *The Negro Voice*, in 1918, for supporting the war effort.

Hubert Harrison is a seminal figure, for not only did he anger Booker T. Washington to such a degree that the latter arranged for him to be fired from his post office job,[13] but also his book, *The Negro and the Nation* (1917), prefigured later political writings of the Harlem Renaissance. His book, *When Africa Awakens* (1920), is still a classic today.

A. Phillip Randolph is known as the founder, in 1925, of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Workers, and Maids. Upon close examination, it is evident that Randolph was aroused as a result of contact with a number of West Indian immigrants. The first to influence Randolph was Hubert Harrison, who justly deserved the title "The Father of Harlem Radicalism," conferred upon him by W. A. Domingo. As Harlem's earliest and most influential street corner orator and union organizer, he persuaded Randolph and his partner, Chandler Owen, to join the Socialist Party in 1914, and soon thereafter Randolph himself appeared on the street corners espousing Socialist doctrine.

Randolph's first two major areas of influence on the political scene were his magazine, *The Messenger*, and his leadership of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Workers, and Maids. In both of these ventures, West Indian immigrants played the initial and essential role. Between 1917 and 1923, Randolph and Owen started more than half-a-dozen political and trade union organizations, all of which failed within a short time. When asked, however, by two West Indians, Ashley Totten and Thomas T. Patterson, to head up the Pullman Porters Brotherhood, Randolph became a success.[14]

The era of the 1920s and 1930s was filled with names of these various

men and women from the Caribbean, and one only has to read Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* to get a quick list of names. Principal among them is Garvey. But there are others, such as Frank Crosswaith (of the Virgin Islands), who worked with Totten and Patterson in the formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, but who also formed, in 1935, the Negro Labor Committee which, in New York City, was responsible for training and funnelling into white labor unions a significant number of blacks. It is unfortunate that Crosswaith is so little known, for as the first black man representing labor appointed to the New York Housing Authority, he was an effective instrument by which the housing conditions of parts of Harlem were improved. He continued this work until his death in 1965.[15]

Of similar stature was W. A. Domingo, publisher of *The Emancipator*, who in 1925 advocated openly the use of guns to rid black people of white oppression. "If death is to be their position," he said,

> then New Negroes are determined to make their dying a costly investment for all concerned . . . they are determined that they shall not travel through the valley of the shadow of death alone, but that some of their oppressors shall be their companions. . . . Negroes realize that force alone is an effective medium to counteract force. Counter-irritants are useful in curing diseases and Negroes are being driven by their white fellow citizens to investigate the curative values inherent in mass action, revolvers and other lethal devices.[16]

Others in this significant group were Cyril V. Briggs, founder of the African Blood Brotherhood and publisher of *The Crusader*, and William Bridges, publisher of *The Challenge*, aided by fellow West Indian, Richard B. Moore. And there was also Claude McKay of "If we must die, let it not be like hogs" fame. There were others too, such as Nella Larsen of the novels *Quicksand* and *Passing;* Joel Rogers, author of the books *From Superman to Man* and *The World's Great Men of Color*, and Arthur Schomburg of the famous Schomburg Collection.

In later periods, we find Caribbean types widely dispersed from New York, but still in the forefront of political and cultural activities. Their names are well known: Stokely Carmichael; Roy Innis; Marvin Dymally, the former Lt. Governor of California in the first administration of Jerry Brown, and presently Congressman from California; Shirley Chisholm; Constance Baker Motley; among others. So their presence remains despite the Walter-McCarran Act of 1956 and other attempts to limit the influx of Caribbean black people.

Apart from the response of our government, which has been hostile to their entry at all times (except between 1941 and 1945), what has been

their reception by the black indigenous community? All along, this reception has been mixed, unfortunately, with affection and distrust. Among the enlightened and educated groups, the distrust was less, and affection and appreciation more pronounced in the period before World War II. Although Kelly Miller, Dean at Howard University, exclaimed in angst that a radical was "an overeducated West Indian without a job," the majority of educated Afro-Americans reflected the opinion of Carter G. Woodson, who stated in 1931:

> Without the achievements of such gentlemen, those who rehearse the progress of the Negro race in America would have much less to talk about than they now have. In proportion to their number in this country, the West Indians have made a much larger contribution to the higher striving of the race than the native Negro in the United States themselves.[17]

Woodson later provided a variation on this theme:

> West Indians of distinct African types are less inclined to undertake the impossible in trying to change their features with hair straightening and bleaching processes as do native Negro victims of the slave psychology in the United States. The black West Indian isn't ashamed of his color. He is very much like the African who boasts of being black and comely, black and beautiful, beautifully black.[18]

In similar fashion, the spate of articles, books and stories dealing with black nationalism by indigenous blacks caused Alain Locke to call this phenomenon "literary Garveyism."[19]

These views were bolstered by Ira De Augustus Reid, a black sociologist, in his 1939 book, *The Negro Immigrant*. He wrote:

> The presence of the foreign Negro population has broadened the social vision of the native group. It has helped speed up the forces of aggressiveness and self-assertion in the direction that prejudice would suppress them. . . .[20]

Later historians, political scientists, and sociologists, both black and white, would echo this theme. Lennox Raphael argued in 1964 that West Indian women brashly integrated the needle trades in New York in the thirties even when there were clear signs reading "colored need not apply."[21] Oscar Handlin, writing in 1959, noted that

> the West Indian colored people . . . are better prepared for urban life and are more aggressive than the natives and have profited as a result.[22]

And George Haynes, an Afro-American, noted in the 1930s that the "success of West Indians (in business) is partly a result of training developed in a far more favorable environment. . . ."[23] Similar state-

ments are echoed in Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, and in Gilbert Osofsky's *Harlem: the Making of a Ghetto*.

What does it mean? (1) Within the black population there was immigration and plural ethnicity which whites, being ignorant about anything not white, were unable to see. (2) The Caribbean immigrant brought a distinctive culture which in turn flavored life in Harlem and New York and transformed the place. (3) They provided a catalytic reaction at a crucial time when blacks were beginning to throw off accommodation.

If all this is true, why then did tension occur between Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Americans in the twenties—a tension which, though lessened, has lasted to this day? Why is it in 1982 that indigenous blacks still refer to West Indians as "those arrogant bastards?"

I believe that the reasons are as follows: (1) black people in this country—despite disclaimers to the contrary—are very much like white people in many of their values and share the view that they are superior to all other black people on earth—especially "banana-eaters" and "monkey-chasers" from the Caribbean, and "hut-dwellers" from Africa. Therefore, there was bound to be resentment when these immigrants arrived here and proved themselves as sophisticated and as urbane as the native black. (2) This condition, of course, worsened when these alien "chaps" and "lassies" spoke with accents of which Lord Featherbottom would be proud. These people were seen by Afro-Americans as putting on airs! In this case, the ethnocentrism and nativism of whites had clearly infected the indigenous Afro-American community. But the immigrants were equally to blame on the issue, for they themselves would in defiance and sheer perversity speak with exaggerated British accents to annoy Afro-Americans and in some instances to ingratiate themselves with Anglophilic whites.

No blame should be attached to them, however, for the envy they engendered in consequence of their success in education. At Howard, Harvard, Columbia, N.Y.U., and others, the West Indian immigrant excelled, surpassing his indigenous brothers and sisters.[24] This was not his fault, but the fault of the poor education afforded blacks in this country until 1954. As Alfred E. Smith noted in his study of West Indian students who attended Howard University between 1867 and 1932:

> The scholarship of the West Indian student in proportion to his numbers has been above average. In view of the difficulties of adjustment to a totally new and different environment, it has been *remarkably* high.[25]

West Indian immigrants cannot be blamed that as late as 1938 they comprised over one-third of the black professional class in New York, and one-fourth of the skilled artisans despite the fact that less than 17 per cent of the city's total black population was foreign born. And they should not have been blamed in the years before World War II and later for: a) being Episcopalian (Angelican) rather than Baptist, A.M.E., or United Methodist; b) viewing Sunday as a staid day—at most a cricket match and not football; c) preferring long courtships for their daughters rather than the American "one-month blitz;" d) being extremely frugal; e) being extremely pushy; f) owning a disproportionate number of businesses and houses in their communities; and g) for owning the *Amsterdam News* until 1965. They cannot be blamed for getting annoyed with ditties like this one:

> When a monkey-chaser dies,
> Don't need no undertaker;
> Just throw him in de Harlem River,
> He'll float back to Jamaica.

But Afro-Caribbean could and can be blamed for at times thinking that: a) a British accent makes them superior; b) because they come from a country in which blacks are a majority and often hold (held) positions of political leadership, they are a more sovereign people; and c) because they can always go home to such countries not entirely dominated by white people that they are somehow more blessed.

What do we see from all this? The answer is clear, for it is to be found in the history of culture contacts. It is known that differences in cultural behavior are not readily accepted by differing groups, particularly when these contacts are made in a competitive atmosphere. A tourist or anthropologist finds other cultures quaint, but this charming perception would not persist if the tourist were forced to stay in the islands and compete with natives for a living. Perceptions of quaintness are swiftly erased, too, if it were perceived that the savvy natives somehow had a home advantage.

Understanding cultural differences does not come easily to repressed groups in competition, particularly when one group feels anger at its past, and is uncertain of its posterity; and the other is quick (though mistakenly) to crow about *its* glorious past. This difficulty of understanding characterizes even academics, such as ourselves, who are supposed to know better. How, then, can the people on the street, who are prone to misinformation and divisive demagoguery, be expected to do better? It is perhaps asking too much.

It seems, then, that among our already burdensome responsibilities, it

is the duty of academics to understand the social dynamics that lead to divisive and immobilizing misperceptions. Afro-Americans, as a group, disclaimers to the contrary by that group calling themselves Black Conservatives notwithstanding, face too many problems of residual racism to add to their burden unnecessary intra-group conflicts. For this reason, we as academics, should be zealous in ridding ourselves and our group of the image of the West Indian immigrant as an "arrogant bastard."

FOOTNOTES

[1] John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974), pp. 118–19.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[4] For a moderate biography of Robert Brown Elliot, see Peggy Lamson, *The Glorious Failure* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1973).

[5] See Hollis R. Lynch's *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1883–1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); for an excellent biography of Blyden, and significant influence of the West Indian on African and Afro-American affairs.

[6] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Immigration (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), Table 86, p. 226. See also Milton Konwitz, *Civil Rights in Immigration* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1953), p. 12.

[7] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920–1932* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), Table 15, p. 32.

[8] Franklin, p. 335.

[9] Roy L. Garis, *Immigration Restriction* (New York: The McMillan Co., 1928), p. 31.

[10] Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 293–94.

[11] Thomas Yenser, ed., *Who's Who in Colored America* (New York: Thomas Yenser, Publisher, 1933).

[12] Carter G. Woodson, "The Contribution of the West Indian in America: A Topic of the Historical Meeting to Be Held in New York City," *Boston Chronicle*, October 31, 1931.

[13] Charles W. Anderson to Booker T. Washington, December 5, 1905, letter quoted in Ira Katznelson, *Black Men, White Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 76.

[14] Jervis Anderson, "The Early Voice: A Profile of A. Phillip Randolph," *The New Yorker*, vol. 48, no. 81 (December 2, 1972), pp. 60–68.

[15] John C. Walter, "Frank R. Crosswaith and the Negro Labor Committee in Harlem, 1925–1939," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, July 1979. See also, John C. Walter, "Frank R. Crosswaith and Labor Unionization in Harlem, 1939–1945," forthcoming in *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, July 1983.

[16] W. A. Domingo, "If We Must Die," *The Messenger*, vol. 2, no. 9 (September, 1919), p. 4.

[17] *Boston Chronicle*, October 31, 1931.

[18] C. G. Woodson, *West Indian Racial Purity Considered an Advantage*, release of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (Washington, D.C., November 3, 1931).

[19] Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. x.

[20] Ira DeAugustine Reid, *The Negro Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. 118.

[21] Lennox Raphael, "West Indians and Afro-Americans," *Freedomways*, vol. IV, no. 3, Summer 1964, pp. 438–45.

[22] Oscar Handlin, *The Newcomers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 71.

[23] George Haynes, *Documentary History of the Negro in the United States, 1910–1932* (Secaucus Citadel Press, 1973), p. 44.

[24] Alfred Edgar Smith, "The West Indian On Campus," *Opportunity*, vol. II, no. 8, August 1933, p. 238.

[25] *Ibid.*